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READING AND UNDERSTANDING:

TIM O'BRIEN AND THE NARRATIVE OF FAILURE

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Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is an example of what I call a narrative of failure. A narrative of failure is a term for a narrative that both fails as narrative—that is, that fails in the enactment of its own telling—and a narrative that thematizes failure—that is, that takes failure or failing as one of its subjects. Narratives of failure fail to fulfill conventional expectations for narratives; as a result, they suggest alternative ways of reading and promote alternative values, values marginalized by disciplinary practices of reading and writing. Among the attributes that make *The Things They Carried* a narrative of failure are: its unwillingness, as narrative, to adhere to conventional distinctions between truth and fiction and among author, narrator, and character; O'Brien's narrator's frequent failure to get the story right; and the failures recounted in the plots of many of its stories—Norman Bowker failing to save Kiowa, for example, or the main character's failure in *On the Rainy River* to act and escape to Canada. But, in this essay, I take the failure of O'Brien's stories to conclude conventionally, to come to rest or settle as narratives, as my central focus. Their failure to make a point—their inability to deliver on the promises they pledge and conclude—necessitates a seemingly endless supplementation, the effect of which is, as Ross Chambers observes about narratives more generally, the blending of the story's content with its context (*Story* 3). In this way, it becomes difficult for readers to distinguish between a narrative point (what a story says) and a contextual one (what a story means). This blurring is so sustained in O'Brien's work that the narrative and contextual points seem constantly adrift. Consequently, the purpose of each story seems to be predicated on the desire to create, with any one telling, an occasion to tell the story again, as if every telling is necessarily a failed one. Yet the fact that O'Brien's stories successfully fail, again and again, gives them an alternative purpose every bit as productive as a more conventional one.

In *Loiterature*, Chambers describes stories that rely on an episodic and repetitive narrative structure where a conventional sense of closure is irrelevant (252); these characteristics, he argues, qualify them as "loiterature." Further, he notes that their repetition is digressive, in the sense that each subsequent iteration implies difference (252). The goal of these stories, Chambers writes,

isn't the narrative or argumentative one of *comprehension* but the encyclopedic one of *comprehensiveness*, not synthesis but seriality [. . .] The outcome is a text structured like a list, an enumeration, an inventory or a catalog, a telling in the etymological sense of counting out, and corresponding more to a purely descriptive practice of notation than to an art of composition. (252)

The primary goal of O'Brien's stories, I wish to suggest, is also not comprehension because there is no simple or single point of understanding to take away from the experience of the Vietnam War. To comprehend it is impossible as each investigative thread multiplies and digresses rather than summates and concludes. What might be more productive than an attempt at synthesis and conclusion, O'Brien's stories suggest, is to place as many of the threads as possible on the table and to describe how the process of weaving them together starts them also to unravel.

One conventional narrative thread O'Brien unravels in *The Things They Carried* is the valuing of literal truth over emotional truth. O'Brien says that a story's truth shouldn't be measured by whether what is reported actually happened or not but by an entirely different standard, a standard of emotion, feeling (Naparstek 10-11). He notes, in *How to Tell a True War Story*, that belief in a story's truth depends on gut instinct; A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe (84). To subvert the standard of happening-truth, O'Brien tells of the occurrence of an event only to assert pages later that said event did not happen. And then, not content to end the story there, he further qualifies his statement, offering that even if it did happen it didn't happen as he just reported it as happening. Tobey Herzog, among others, explores this and similar kinds of narrative failures in O'Brien's writing, his narrative deception and contradictions, his purposeful habit of mixing personal and historical facts and fictions, and the attention he draws to his narrators' and his own unreliability (893), and offers as many as eight explanations for their presence. [1] O'Brien's tendency to supplement story with commentary and fiction with fact is a manifestation of his resistance to a conventional sense of narrative closure, and it is enacted through a kind of endless supplementation that I wish to look at more closely, especially as it is performed in *Speaking of Courage* and its supplement, *Notes*. O'Brien tells stories, I want to argue, not to convey any one point about Vietnam or about anything else but so that he might tell them again. In this way, I am aligning my argument most closely with Herzog's hypothesis of uncertainty, granting that O'Brien is methodologically representing the elusive nature of truth and reality through supplementation (910). Yet O'Brien's project, I think, is more complicated than that. By telling any one story again and again, he makes possible the occasion (or perhaps the necessity) for a supplemental story while also exercising the supplement in that occasion as another story. The need to supplement a story with another story, or to revise and to retell the same story differently, seems necessary to O'Brien for

communicating his experience of the War, but it also emphasizes the contextual and provisional nature of meaning-making, a characterization, I think, of the event of understanding.

As Clara Juncker says, ♦[B]y insisting on elusive identities and history as a textual construct, ♦ O'Brien illustrates a preoccupation ♦with what resists representation♦ (111). Yet this resistance is not an aversion; rather it seems an obsession, or as Juncker writes, a ♦continuing interest in the powers and potentialities of storytelling♦ (114). After all, how does O'Brien, the narrator of *The Things They Carried*, believe you tell a true war story? By telling it ♦one more time♦ (91). In the end, it is not, as Alex Vernon writes, that ♦O'Brien doesn't trust language, ♦ but that, as Vernon goes on to mention, ♦words fail him, ♦ that ♦language can do nothing♦ (185), that processes of representing and understanding, dependent on language, are failed processes, incomplete and imperfect; they leave gaps between the representable and the unrepresentable, failing thusly to fully complete their work. Yet this failure is the foundational condition of language, analogous to Derrida's notion of *différance*. Constructing narratives of failure, then, seems O'Brien's way to make explicit what Barbara Johnson observes as the foundational problem of writing: one ♦cannot write his way into an immediacy that would eliminate writing♦ (♦Writing♦ 44-45). As a result, any attempt to represent the immediacy of a specific event like the Vietnam War is already a failed attempt because it relies on language and its (failed) system of representation. Understanding a more general text, like the text of one's life, is regarded as a failed process as well for these same reasons. The attempt of language to cover over this failure remains, seemingly, an unacknowledged fiction; the extreme fictionality O'Brien employs is intended to draw attention to the fiction at the foundation of our system of representation. As Johnson notes, ♦[T]he logic of writing is thus a double logic: writing is called upon as a necessary remedy for *différance*, but at the same time it is the very *différance* for which a remedy must be sought♦ (♦Writing♦ 45). This double logic, Johnson reminds us, is ♦the logic of the supplement♦ (♦Writing♦ 45).

A Genre at the Heart of Teaching

My own interest in O'Brien's work comes from a general attraction to ambiguity in literature, from the memory of the pleasure of hearing O'Brien read ♦The Lives of the Dead♦ in person as an undergraduate, and from an intellectual connection with the literary, or what Chambers calls the "loiterate," form I have named the narrative of failure. As a former high school teacher who spent five years in a large urban school district, I recognize my own utilization of narratives of failure when telling stories to describe my teaching experience. The entire five years I spent teaching there might be best categorized as failure. But, even so, my high school teaching experiences were so complicatedly failed that representing them in/as narratives of failure fails to capture their complexity in a conventionally conclusive way. I think, then, as a form for telling a teaching story, narratives of failure can be remarkably productive because, like O'Brien's storytelling, they suggest alternative values, values like comprehensiveness and seriality, values that resist and elide the heavy-handedness of an educational apparatus and that draw attention to their own institutional, disciplinary, or methodological constitution. By doing so, they continually force us to ask questions about power and desire, about processes of making knowledge, processes at the heart of schooling and teaching; these questions should be at the heart of schooling as they are at the heart of O'Brien's storytelling, questions like: What am I, as teacher, trying to teach? What is the institution teaching me and my students? What knowledge is important? Who benefits from such knowledge? Who is left out? What is at stake in the production of such knowledge? By blending content and context, O'Brien illustrates that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower. In such circumstances, one is obligated to ask what is both lost and gained in the process, to ask in whose name and in what interests is knowledge made, and to ask who benefits and who concedes.

Traditionally, one purpose attributed to literature has been to teach, and the writer is a figure who is often conflated with the figure of the teacher. Further, as Barbara Johnson notes in her ♦Editor's Preface, ♦ "The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre," to a *Yale French Studies* issue on teaching as a literary genre, literary texts often dramatize the teaching situation. In other words, it is not unusual to encounter the pedagogical in literature. Writing and teaching are analogous activities based, I believe, in choicemaking; each figure attempts, through some series of purposeful moves, to bring about a desired effect. What complicates matters is that the desired effect is often itself another desire♦as appears the case in *The Things They Carried*. Because what *Things* teaches seems to be a desire rather than a thing or an idea, it fails, in a way, even to be pedagogical♦at least explicitly pedagogical; yet the fact that it is so often taught, in both college and high school classrooms, suggests perhaps that we are seeking to think of the pedagogical situation differently. [2] For that reason, *The Things They Carried* seems an especially teachable book.

A Metaphor for Reading

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer characterizes understanding as an event. Building on this characterization, David Bartholomae notes that understanding is not something one possesses but something one performs (96). He argues that one cannot say that he or she understands until he or she speaks ♦for a text, ♦ replacing its words with his or her own (92). Even when reading the text of a film or the text of real life, one cannot say one understands until one writes that text. In this way, every writing is also a reading. As a written text, *The Things They Carried*, is also a readerly performance, a text that represents, in part, a reading of the Vietnam War. Through our own reading of O'Brien, then, we can access one ♦version of a reader reading♦ (Bartholomae 97), and in this way O'Brien's writing serves as a metaphor for his reading of the War just as my own text serves as a metaphor for a reading of O'Brien.

Metaphor, though, is also a figure of failure, for it works by covering over and standing in place of the gap ♦at the center of language♦ (Greene 455); as a figure, metaphor takes the place of but cannot fully replace another, and while it suggests equivalence, it can never completely erase *différance*. The appearance of metaphorical replacement extends the fiction that covers over the ♦*différance* between signifier and signified inherent in the sign♦ (Johnson, ♦Writing♦ 43). Because reading and writing work at the unstable foundation of language, they are as James Seitz argues, ♦tenuous, uncertain, indebted acts of imagination♦ (16). The pretense that one can master any one text, through an act of critical or creative performance, is just that: a pretense. The best one can do is pay close attention♦that is, read and write critically and reflectively♦to processes of production and reception. As O'Brien makes these processes more and more uncertain, he forces readers to perform more carefully and cautiously.

While engaging, the narrative uncertainty of *The Things They Carried* and O'Brien's proclivity for supplementation complicates our act of reading as it draws our attention to his. The attention O'Brien calls ♦to the process of invention♦ and the indeterminacy of any one story's truth gives his stories, as Catherine Calloway argues, ♦epistemological♦ status because they raise such basic questions about how we compose the world (249). As a metaphor for reading, O'Brien's stories also compose Vietnam. Seitz writes: ♦By equating one thing with another,

metaphor performs at once the most radical and the most common of rhetorical gestures, [. . .] Readers of metaphor are thus asked not simply to discern resemblances between this and that; they are asked to enter a fictional world in which the distinction between this and that no longer obtains (7). Because metaphor pushes beyond similarity, to insist that one thing is (an)other, its effects are not only sensory but epistemological, as well. So the act of reading/writing all stories, not just O'Brien's, are part of an epistemological event called understanding. In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien writes about the event of understanding while producing an occasion, or event, in which his understanding continues to develop; he reads as he writes, so to speak, and attempts to prolong the event of understanding indefinitely because he understands it to be infinitely incomplete. Bartholomae calls any one reading/writing ♦a rhetorical act of placement, ♦a way of locating one's self and one's text in context (104). *The Things They Carried*, then, is both the articulation of O'Brien's understanding of the War and the articulation of what it means to understand, but both articulations are contingent on context.

Speaking of Courage

♦Speaking of Courage♦ is Norman Bowker's story, the story of a soldier returned from Vietnam, struggling to fit back into civilian life. In the story, Bowker is restless and in constant motion, driving around and around the lake in his hometown, driving literally in circles♦loitering. His failure to arrive at any one destination is symbolic of his inability to move beyond or reconcile his experiences in Vietnam. Specifically, Bowker is unable to put to rest the haunting death of his friend and fellow soldier, Kiowa. Further, Bowker's trouble adjusting to life without the War seems to come from an inability to talk about his experiences as a soldier, especially as the soldier who failed to save Kiowa's life. Bowker just watches the activity on and around the lake, insulated from it by the body of his father's Chevy, while he re-imagines his past, the life he lived here before the war. Even when Bowker stops driving♦to eat at the drive-in root beer stand♦feelings of isolation surround him. He seems the only one who doesn't know to use the intercom to order, and his verbal exchange with his server is hostile and brief. The closest he comes to talking with someone about what's troubling him is when the faceless voice of the intercom seems to invite him into conversation. The intercom asks, ♦What you really need, friend?♦ (171). Bowker, though, loses his nerve. He starts, ♦How'd you like to hear about♦♦ but trails off, saying, ♦Nothing♦ (*Things* 171).

In an interview, O'Brien calls Bowker ♦inarticulate♦ (Naparsteck 7), and inarticulate Bowker may be; but he is at least aware that his inability to talk keeps him isolated, stuck in the car, continually circling physically the lake of his hometown and mentally the ♦lake♦ in which Kiowa died. [3] Bowker's awareness of his own inarticulateness and its effect on his present life is made even clearer in ♦Notes, ♦the ♦story♦ that immediately follows ♦Speaking of Courage. ♦♦Notes, ♦as its title suggests, is a ♦story♦ that acts more as commentary on ♦Speaking of Courage♦; as such, ♦Notes♦ is a fictional moment that breaks the conventional staging of fiction, offered by O'Brien to reveal and discuss his fictional reasons for writing ♦Speaking of Courage. ♦ Yet this is a singular moment, for O'Brien doesn't feel the need to offer ♦notes♦ to any other story in *Things*.

In ♦Notes, ♦O'Brien explains that he first wrote ♦Speaking of Courage♦ because Bowker asked him to. In a letter that recounts his difficulty readjusting to civilian life and his inability to talk to anyone about it and that reports, as a result, that all he does is drive around the lake in his hometown, Bowker asks O'Brien to dramatize his situation in a story. In his letter, the inarticulate Bowker at least gives voice to a desire, a desire to read his own circumstances once someone describes them back to him. But Bowker's letter does more than that; it says too much. O'Brien explains that it goes on for ♦seventeen handwritten pages♦ (*Things* 178).

O'Brien does, though, respond to Bowker's request and write ♦Speaking of Courage, ♦ but he does so intending it to become a part of his novel, *Going After Cacciato*. And, in this version of the story, there is no Norman Bowker; he is replaced by the novel's main character, Paul Berlin. So, in this way, Bowker, who must feel as if he's losing grip on his present life, also loses grip on his past. Yet the story never does become part of *Cacciato*, for O'Brien takes it out of the novel, ♦partly because it just didn't fit, ♦ (Naparsteck 7). [4] Nevertheless, after some rewriting, O'Brien does publish ♦Speaking of Courage, ♦ in the *Massachusetts Review*. He also sends this version of the story to Bowker, even though it remains Paul Berlin's story. There remain other, significant discrepancies between this version and Bowker's story. In particular, O'Brien fails Bowker in this version of the story by changing the circumstances surrounding the death of Kiowa, by substituting the ♦lake♦ for a tunnel, and by removing the name ♦Kiowa♦ from the character who dies. So, when Bowker reads this version of the story, he isn't impressed: ♦It's not terrible, ♦ Bowker tells O'Brien, ♦but you left out Vietnam. Where's Kiowa? Where's the shit?♦ (*Things* 181). O'Brien, it seems, has violated the terms of their implied contract; by misreading Bowker's letter, failing to respond to it as Bowker desires, and misplacing Bowker's story, he has written the wrong story, created the wrong context for Bowker's text.

The Narrative of Failure as Loiterature

In an essay that laid the groundwork for his remarkable book, *Loiterature*, Ross Chambers defines "loiterature" as literature that loiters, that takes its time going from one point to another, that isn't defined by chronology, that values the diversion more than the course. Narrative, Chambers argues, is ♦intimately connected with the production of knowledge, and so with effects of power and desire♦ (♦Strolling♦ 17). As a mode of knowledge-making, Chambers sees loiterature as counterdisciplinary, and ♦less exclusionary♦ as a result (♦Strolling♦ 18). Further, he goes on to explain that ♦loiterature does propose alternative values, those of the ♦writely♦ of difference, deferral, and limitless supplementation (♦Strolling♦ 20-21). Because it shares these traits and values, the narrative of failure I propose is a kind of loiterature. Further, Chambers says, loiterature's event-, rather than time-, focus offers the occasion for a witty and entertainingly seductive performance of failure that comments on the disciplinary values of productivity and mastery♦ (♦Strolling♦ 20-21). As a kind of loiterature, narratives of failure also resist the notion of adding up to any one thing and, therefore, tend to disperse rather than summate; their goal, I emphasize, isn't comprehension but comprehensiveness, not synthesis but seriality (Chambers, *Loiterature* 252). An example of a narrative of failure, ♦Speaking of Courage, ♦ seductively performs its own failure, utilizing what Chambers calls the "etcetera principle," for as soon as it ends, O'Brien takes it up again♦in ♦Notes♦ and, to a lesser extent, in ♦In the Field. ♦ In ♦Notes, ♦ the etcetera principle is at work in O'Brien's chronicling of the publication history of the story, a history Michael Kaufmann understatedly calls ♦somewhat complicated♦ (341, footnote 7). After all, O'Brien writes at least three stories, the *Cacciato* version of ♦Speaking of Courage♦ (which is never published), the version that appears in *The Massachusetts Review* (and that Norman Bowker reads), and another version that appears first in *Granta* and then in *Things* (the version that includes ♦Notes♦). And, at the end of ♦Notes, ♦ O'Brien hopes that this final version of ♦Speaking of Courage♦ ♦makes good on Norman 's Bowker's silence♦ (181), suggesting perhaps that if it was

judged not to, he would try it again.

In fact, at the end of ♦Notes, ♦O'Brien writes,

Now, a decade after his death, I'm hoping that ♦Speaking of Courage♦ makes good on Norman Bowker's silence. And I hope it's a better story. Although the old structure remains, the piece has been substantially revised, in some places by severe cutting, in other places by the addition of new material. Norman is back in the story, where he belongs, and I don't think he would mind that his real name appears. The central incident♦our long night in the shit field along the Song Tra Bong♦has been restored to the piece. It was hard stuff to write. Kiowa, after all, had been a close friend, and for years I've avoided thinking about his death and my own complicity in it. Even here it's not easy. In the interests of truth, however, I want to make clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own. (181-2)

This final time, O'Brien more carefully follows the instructions in Bowker's letter, centering the story on the death of Kiowa and Bowker's inability to save his friend's life. But then, surprisingly, he adds ♦Notes.♦ Even after living up to his contract with Bowker, writing the story Bowker wants him to write, O'Brien can't stop writing. Further, at the end of the excerpt cited above from ♦Notes,♦ he takes more from Bowker, the responsibility for Kiowa's death. O'Brien, it seems, wants to own the burden Bowker bears for Kiowa's death, and he insists, then, that it is his own. Whether we are persuaded by O'Brien that Bowker is not responsible for Kiowa's death, however, relies on this note, this story behind the story, a supplement to the story, a ♦commentary♦ on the story, the thing that makes it appear as if ♦Speaking of Courage♦ is no story at all.

In ♦Notes,♦ O'Brien ultimately wants us not to evaluate Norman Bowker negatively. Bowker's story, when read literally, is exemplary of a man exercising courage. Simply by titling the story ♦Speaking of Courage,♦ O'Brien seems to want to valorize Bowker's actions as heroic. Since we're speaking of courage, O'Brien seems to be saying, let me tell you about Norman Bowker. The problem, of course, is that ♦Speaking of Courage♦ clearly fails to fit traditional expectations for a heroic tale, for Kiowa dies. Bowker's courage is not embodied by a saved, living body; Bowker has nothing to show for his actions♦not even a Silver Star. Further, he has no opportunity to explain himself, and the one person he entrusts to do the explaining for him, writes the wrong story♦at least initially when Bowker is still alive to read it. ♦Speaking of Courage,♦ in the end, fails to save even Bowker's life. And saving Bowker's life appears to be O'Brien's project.

For O'Brien doesn't tell us about Bowker's failures to condemn him; rather he presents Bowker's failures, and his own, in order to redeem him. In this sense, Bowker's constant driving around the lake in ♦Speaking of Courage♦ becomes metaphorically purposeful; he drives both to stave off his suicide and to get closer to committing it. Bowker's driving finally can be seen as a way of circling the subject, and it is analogous to O'Brien's narrative project. His constant reframing of events, his supplemental storytelling, and his unwillingness to admit that certain events actually happened are simply ways of circling the subject, too. They are not, however, tactics of avoidance; rather they are ways of enacting a desire to represent the complex experience of the Vietnam War♦in its comprehensiveness♦and the even more complex event of understanding it. O'Brien's narratives, especially in their endless supplementarity, express the desire to say something about the War yet, because they can never completely fulfill that desire, also extend and prolong it. O'Brien simply keeps telling stories that create occasions to tell more stories because, in the end, any event of understanding is an incomplete one. The clearest way to illustrate this, for O'Brien, seems to be in drawing attention to his own methodology; as Lynn Wharton notes in a review of critical work on O'Brien's fiction, ♦It is [O'Brien's] very act of influencing what the reader (and the interviewer) believes about his work [♦by blurring fact and fiction, drawing attention to narrative unreliability, and supplementarity♦that] underpins his art (or perhaps I should say artfulness)♦ ("Hand" 134).

Gadamer argues that one must first admit that one does not know in order to understand, and O'Brien's stories seem to get their power from an ambiguity about their own epistemological status; their force is felt by readers in not knowing, in uncertainty, in the silence and failure produced as part of the emotional experience of reading. Because of this, they are explicitly about what Gadamer characterizes as the event of understanding. Knowing and not knowing work dialectically to bring about understanding, an understanding that includes knowledge that understanding is never complete and shouldn't remain static. This is, I think, to be within the hermeneutic circle, to be attempting to communicate something that one has only an incomplete knowledge of in a way that can never say fully what one means.

Further, O'Brien conveys this in his stories by placing at the center of *The Things They Carried* a silence, some thing that remains unrepresentable yet is nonetheless present. Steven Kaplan notes that O'Brien speaks this unknowable using the phrase ♦There it is♦; Kaplan argues that O'Brien does this ♦to make the unspeakable and indescribable and the uncertain real and present for a fleeting moment♦ (46). ♦It♦, however, remains unnamed♦having no discernable antecedent♦and unnamable. ♦It♦ is finally perhaps a ghost, and O'Brien writes to keep ghosts alive. [5] ♦Speaking of Courage♦ keeps Kiowa's ghost present; ♦Notes♦ keeps Bowker's present. And O'Brien appears to need the presence of ghosts.

In fact, later in *The Things They Carried*, when he fictionally reports, in ♦Field Trip♦♦another story, as Kaufmann notes, that provides ♦explanation and context♦ in order ♦to tell and explain a more complicated story♦ (337)♦ returning to Vietnam with his daughter, to the ground where Kiowa was buried, he notes his disappointment. There are ♦no ghosts.♦ O'Brien says (207). He writes, ♦It simply wasn't there♦ (210, my emphasis). Then, once he wades out into the water and looks down into the field, he says, ♦There it is♦ (212, my emphasis). His daughter, however, doesn't see or feel it (or does she?); she says, ♦Some dumb thing happens a long time ago and you can't ever forget it♦ (209, my emphasis). ♦And that's bad?♦ O'Brien asks. ♦No,♦ she says, ♦That's weird♦ (209). And indeed it is weird to court ghosts, to invite their presence, to go looking for them, even. But it's a literacy practice O'Brien cultivates for the fruit it bears. He wishes us all haunted.

And, in that sense, I think, O'Brien chooses to write in a way that shares with his readers the responsibility for the War, for the deaths of his fellow soldiers, for the destruction of the land, for the imposition on the Vietnamese. Kaplan argues,

By constantly involving and then re-involving the reader in the task of determining what actually happened in a given situation, in a story, and by forcing the reader to experience the impossibility of ever knowing with any certainty what actually happened, O'Brien liberates himself from the lonesome responsibility of remembering and trying to understand events. He also creates a community of individuals immersed in the act of experiencing the uncertainty or indeterminacy of all events. (51)

This attempt to share responsibility is evident in *In the Field*, a further supplement to *Notes* that retells the story of Kiowa's death, a telling through which O'Brien again passes on the responsibility for his death. In this story, O'Brien describes Kiowa's platoon searching the shit field for his dead body. First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross blames himself for choosing this place in which to bivouac. Given time to reflect, Cross knows he made a mistake; he should have chosen higher ground. He confesses that this was indefensible ground from the start and he acknowledges that Kiowa's death was [his] own fault (191). But there's also a boy in this story who seems more concerned with finding the picture of a former girlfriend than finding Kiowa's body. We learn, though, that it was he who flipped on a flashlight to show Kiowa this picture of the girlfriend, revealing their position to the enemy moments before the mortar struck Kiowa and sent him into the earth. This soldier, trying hard not to cry also blamed himself (192). And, finally, there's Azar who along with Norman Bowker and Mitchell Sanders is searching for Kiowa, too. Azar is noting the ultimate irony of Kiowa's death, making jokes about eating shit and being wasted in the waste and biting the dirt, so to speak (187, 188). And it is Azar who later explains, after they locate and recover Kiowa's body, to Bowker that he is sorry for those jokes, that he feels guilty for making them, and that he thinks that if [he]d kept [his] mouth shut none of it would've ever happened; he feels like it was [his] fault (197). Bowker's response simply carries this to its end: Nobody's fault,' he said. Everybody's (197).

In this way, O'Brien is enacting his belief that stories can save us. Salvation, in fact, is performed in many stories following the conventional Christian model. The sins, real or imagined, of Kiowa, of Bowker, and of the other soldiers are taken away through the sacrifice of Tim O'Brien himself. It is O'Brien who ultimately takes responsibility for everything. By doing so, he sets all of us free. Yet, because he really cannot do so, he must do so fictively, in a way that can be read, and, as a fiction, his gesture fails, keeping us on the hook, responsible for the horrors of war, too.

Failure as Teacher Work

In her preface to *Teaching as a Literary Genre*, Johnson reads Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to describe two views of pedagogy. The first notes the desire to transform linguistic knowledge into existential knowledge, to fill in the gaps inherent in language, especially literary language, with judgments and explanations (vi). This is a pedagogy that O'Brien works hard to resist, refusing to explain or instruct, undermining explanations, and offering contrary accounts. The second view of pedagogy Johnson refers to as teaching as a compulsion, a compulsion to repeat what one has not yet understood (vii). This view fits O'Brien's storytelling comfortably, and it is a pose poised against conventions that suggest mastery and completeness. This notion of pedagogy honors the gaps inherent in literature, acknowledges that the gaps must always remain and can never be taught except as linguistic gaps. That is perhaps what makes literature our greatest teacher.

Telling stories again, in the service of a counting out, allows one to generate multiple points of view and alternative responses to characters and situations; this is an exercise in resourcefulness, a trait of both good teaching and good writing. Teachers and writers are always working within constraints, expectations of audience and purpose, to express their own personal desires, to convey what is important to them. The message is always compromised, but good teachers are resourceful, generating multiple ways to deliver their message, and careful, weighing the effects of each, given the contexts of their work. They ultimately choose one way because they must, and they ultimately fail to completely deliver; they second guess themselves and revisit other options. They often wish to start again.

In this way, the notion of failure saturates teacher-work. Our best lessons are never completely successful. Making our classroom work more attractive and valuable to every student than any other thing he or she might do in the classroom is impossible, yet it remains our goal; meeting the needs of every student on any one particular day is impossible, too. Yet we hold, within the profession, to traditional notions of success that necessarily leave our practices lacking. According to these definitions, all we can do as teachers is fail. Even so, that kind of failure more accurately represents the work of teaching and the process of understanding at work; failure is foundational to the nature of what it means to teach. Teachers ought not dwell on their lack of conventional success but rather teach in order to teach again. Reiteration is not a sign of lack of success but a hallmark of the teacher's work. This is one lesson an attentive reader understands from Tim O'Brien.

Notes

[1] The eight explanations he offers in a kind of list, begging the question whether criticism on literature must also operate as literature. [\[back to text\]](#)

[2] I note the very recent NCTE publication of *Tim O'Brien in the Classroom*, edited by Barry Gilmore, to illustrate the current pedagogical interest in O'Brien's work. [\[back to text\]](#)

[3] Kiowa dies when the platoon bivouacs in the rain on a swampy field that soon turns into what is believed to be mud. Under mortar fire, the ground begins to open up, swallowing what sits on top of it. Kiowa begins sinking in a field of what turns out to be shit, the village waste dump. Bowker makes his way toward Kiowa, and, when he reaches him, he has almost gone completely under. Bowker grabs Kiowa by the boot and tries to hoist him out of the lake; unable, he begins to sink himself. With shit in his mouth, nose, and eyes, Bowker lets go, saving himself. Kiowa presumably drowns. In *Speaking of Courage*, Bowker calls this a moment when he had been braver than he ever thought possible but not so brave as he wanted to be (172). It is the moment, Bowker thinks, when he lost the Silver Star for bravery. [\[back to text\]](#)

[4] Although Cathy Calloway observes that this earliest version of *Speaking of Courage* plays off chapter 14 of *Going After Cacciato* (251). [\[back to text\]](#)

[5] In an interview with Lynn Wharton, O'Brien says, This is a primary function of stories, to keep the ghosts with us. Stories allow the dead to say, Hello, guys,' I suppose ("Journeying" 230). [\[back to text\]](#)

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